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ABSTRACT

This document, which is designed for individuals responsible for curriculum development and delivery at further education (FE) colleges in Britain, offers guidance on curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation and contains an instrument for monitoring quality throughout the curriculum change process. The first half of the document details an ongoing curriculum development process that includes the following steps: initial stage (recognizing the need for change and deciding to initiate planning for a specified development); planning stage (identifying a planning team and obtaining approval of the new development and detailed plans for implementing it); implementation stage (conducting a continuous process of identifying an implementation team and making initial contact with prospective learners); and evaluation stage (conducting periodic and ongoing evaluations concurrently with the preceding three stages). The next section lists for team leaders and college curriculum managers the specific guidelines that pertain to the following aspects of curriculum development/implementation: planning; leadership, people, and communication; resources; and evaluation. The second half of the document discusses considerations in developing an instrument to monitor program quality throughout the curriculum change process. The appendix contains a red alert form to use when problems identified in a curriculum require urgent action. (Contains acknowledgements and a list of seven related documents). (MN)

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STELLA DIXON

Maintaining quality during curriculum change

Curriculum change and development are always challenging. At the present time when the context in which they take place is changing, they are particularly so. At such times, the maintenance and enhancement of quality can become vulnerable.

This publication can help by offering:

- guidance on curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation — helping to get it right first time
- an instrument to monitor quality throughout the process, providing a quick and easy way of checking whether all is well

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Curriculum development

Whatever the nature of the curriculum development, whether it is introducing a new GNVQ or making the delivery of an existing

programme more flexible, the process can be seen as a series of four stages, which sometimes overlap.

The initial stage

This starts with a recognition of the need for change and finishes with a decision to go ahead with the planning for a specified development.

The planning stage

This begins with the identification of a planning team and ends with approval or accreditation of the new development and the completion of detailed plans.

The implementation stage

This begins with the identification of an implementation team and making initial contact with prospective learners; this stage is continuous.

Evaluation

This stage is both periodic and ongoing. It overlaps with the previous stages.

Another way of representing these stages is as a cycle (see Figure 1).

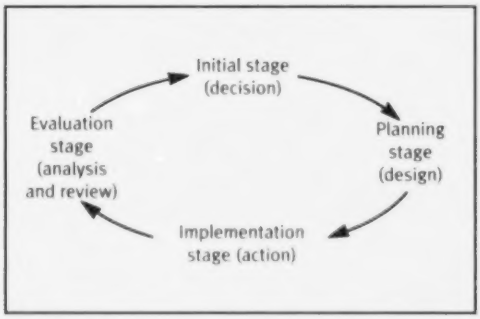

Figure 1.

Many people in different positions will be involved in the curriculum development process at various times. These might include:

- the senior management team (SMT)
- the senior curriculum manager
- the course/programme manager
- the quality manager
- a cross-college co-ordinator (e.g. of GNVQ developments)
- the planning team
- the delivery team
- the internal approvals committee
- academic board
- heads of schools, divisions or faculties
- awarding bodies
- students
- advisory boards/employers

Exactly who is involved and at what stage will depend on a number of factors, for example:

- the nature of the proposed change
- the culture of decision making in the college and the processes involved
- external requirements
- the structure of the college (e.g. line management and its links with curriculum and quality management, the existence of cross-college co-ordinators)
- the experience and expertise of those involved

It is important that these factors are considered in relation to any proposed development and decisions made about who is to be involved and why. Thereafter everyone will need to understand:

- the overall task and the key purpose of each stage
- the timescale involved (e.g. internal and external deadlines)
- links with planning cycles
- the respective roles of everyone involved

- the importance of communicating and consulting effectively with other key players
- what resources are available

The initial stage

Key purpose: to reach a decision about the most appropriate way to meet an identified need for curriculum change or development.

This stage can be initiated by a variety of individuals or bodies. It may originate, for example, from:

- national developments (e.g. the introduction of GNVQs)
- the college's strategic plan and the direction in which it has decided to develop (e.g. away from classroom teaching towards more resource-based learning)
- a review of the college's overall curriculum offer. Such an audit may identify gaps either in a curriculum area or in progression routes
- specific curriculum review and evaluation practice
- market research
- customer demand
- someone's bright idea!

Whatever the source and having identified the need for change, colleges will need to:

- consider alternatives available
- consult appropriate individuals/groups about the alternatives and their implications (e.g. the curriculum team, students, advisory groups, potential customers/employers, awarding bodies)
- consider visiting other colleges offering provision
- consider resource implications
- consider responses to the consultation in the light of the college's strategic and/or development plan
- decide, in consultation with others, the preferred option and communicate it to other stakeholders
- make a proposal to the appropriate college approvals body with resource requirements (including any staff development needs)
- communicate the decision to appropriate people

The planning stage

Key purpose: to plan the effective introduction of a curriculum development or change to a schedule with the resources allocated.

Curriculum planning takes place alongside other activities in a busy college year. Finding time to meet to plan and consult is a common difficulty. Sometimes this can be overcome by common timetabling for meetings and the use of away days. In addition, colleges participating in this project became increasingly aware of the need to defend, protect or nurture the team. In practice this meant recognising the extra work it was doing and, where possible, protecting it from extra work. Managers at various levels in the college and team members themselves became increasingly skilled at doing this, once the need to do so had been recognised and accepted. Curriculum planning is a skilful and challenging task: staff doing it need to be valued and supported.

During the planning stage, colleges will need to do two types of planning: preliminary and detailed.

Preliminary planning

Colleges will need to:

- clarify the task, the timescale and the resources required to do it
- identify a team leader to take the planning forward, bearing in mind the

task, the skills required and other demands on staff time

- ensure the team leader is clear about the task and the timescale
- agree planning team members
- identify relevant college policies to be borne in mind during planning (e.g. equal opportunities, marketing, curriculum, recruitment, work placement and quality policies)
- identify relevant college procedures to be followed (e.g. internal approval procedure)
- identify those other people who need to be kept informed of progress or who will be affected by the changes planned (e.g. marketing, guidance, library, administrative and management information system staff). In addition, the delivery team will need to know about the plans, as will staff of programmes from which students are likely to be recruited and to which they are likely to progress

'small planning teams are more effective, but others need to be kept informed' (team leader)

- make sure adequate time, resources and accommodation are available
- arrange any staff development necessary (e.g. visits to existing providers in colleges or elsewhere; seminars and conferences; interviews with people with technical expertise such as cross-college co-ordinators; assessor training; retraining)
- gather appropriate documentation (e.g. specifications, syllabuses, guidelines for submissions, assessment requirements)
- decide upon the broad curriculum approach (e.g. unitised, modular, roll-on roll-off, integrated)
- identify quality criteria (these may be college's own or devised or modified by the team) for the planned provision

For example, it might be decided that the quality criteria for any new programme in a college should include:

- **regular tutorial support**
- **the rapid return of marked work**
- **inclusive equal opportunities practices**
- **the use of a variety of teaching and learning strategies**
- **the provision of a course handbook**
- **regular feedback from learners**

Increasingly colleges are developing specific standards for these criteria or desired features, as they are also sometimes known; for example, marked work will be returned in five working days (see *Continuous Improvement and Quality Standards*, FEU, 1994).

Detailed planning

Colleges will need to:

- brief the team and agree a team action plan, detailing tasks and responsibilities and showing the meetings schedule and key dates

'I didn't realise until later that the time when I made most demands on staff in terms of planning (for GNVQ) was the same time at which they were busiest assessing the last cohort of BTEC students; I should have seen this and altered the timescale accordingly.' (team leader responsible for introducing GNVQ)

- set up smaller working groups or pairs to undertake specific pieces of work with target dates for completion and reporting back
- monitor progress and modify the action plan accordingly
- encourage team members to share successes and difficulties, provide constructive feedback, and seek solutions
- report on progress as necessary
- consult as appropriate, advisory groups, equal opportunities specialists, curriculum advisers (internal and external), prospective employers. Listen

to feedback, make judgements and modify plans accordingly

- decide whether to broaden team membership at the detailed planning stage (e.g. when devising schemes of work, developing learning materials, booklists, course handbooks, planning assessment, tutorials, induction, teaching and learning strategy and evaluation)
- plan the evaluation strategy for the new provision, bearing in mind cross-college approaches and any particular needs
- ensure relevant information is given to cross-college staff in time (e.g. for marketing and recruitment purposes, for the provision of learning support, for the purchase of library books and materials)
- co-ordinate the writing of the first draft of submission
- evaluate the submission against the college's own quality criteria and evaluating and validating body's (EVB) requirements. Modify as necessary
- submit documentation to the internal validation body. Modify as necessary
- send the final submission to the EVB for validation. Modify if necessary
- evaluate the team's performance in planning (including its management)

'I suddenly realised I had never systematically evaluated the planning process and my part in it before. On reflection it was easy to see where we went wrong and how this spilled over into the delivery phase. We evaluate our teaching but not our other activities.' (team leader)

- ensure the lessons learned about the planning process are communicated to appropriate people and acted upon in future
- receive approval/accreditation
- celebrate achievement

The implementation stage

Key purpose: to ensure that the plans are implemented effectively and any difficulties are identified and managed.

It is likely that the team responsible for implementing the plans will have some common membership with the planning team. Effective communication between the two teams is essential if the plans are to be implemented successfully. Care must be taken to ensure that part timers are fully briefed too.

'It soon became obvious why we seemed to be having difficulties in the first few months of implementing the new course. Planning had had to be completed to tight deadlines so I had only involved a very small number of colleagues who could work together quickly and well. The team responsible for delivery was much bigger and, in retrospect, I had not explained the plans sufficiently to them. As a consequence, they were not in a position to deal with many minor difficulties as and when they arose and so they referred them all to me. I could and should have prepared them better.' (team leader)

This issue of effective communication and the development of a shared understanding of the task between planning and implementation team members is even more crucial if two agencies are collaborating in the delivery of the programme. In one of the participating colleges, this took the form of a memorandum between the two organisations, which defined the nature and extent of the collaboration and established responsibility for:

- academic arrangements, including the programme itself, course evaluation and operational management
- administrative and welfare arrangements
- the provision of resources

How ever good the communication, every contingency can't be planned for. It is important to expect that these will arise and are not seen as failures. The creation of a culture of learning together

and problem solving is likely to be more effective.

Bearing this in mind, colleges will need to:

before entry

- identify the implementation team
- ensure it is fully briefed
- ensure the marketing strategy is implemented
- brief the central guidance staff about the new/modified programme and its selection criteria
- ensure any necessary staff development is complete
- undertake any detailed planning still outstanding, including induction
- finalise the assessment schedule and other course documentation
- timetable and resource the new/modified programme
- build in regular meeting times for the team to share experiences and manage unforeseen events
- interview and select students according to the criteria decided upon

on programme

- deliver the induction programme
- deliver the programme as planned but be prepared to modify
- ensure the team meets regularly to review and modify the plans accordingly
- monitor progress by
  — using statistical information (e.g. attendance and retention)
  — seeking student feedback
  — seeking feedback from employers and others
- maintain momentum
- support and defend the team
- provide students with feedback on progress
- manage any difficulties effectively
- celebrate success
- disseminate good practice elsewhere in the college
- ensure progression routes are clear to students and staff

The evaluation stage

Key purpose: to evaluate the implementation of the new provision in order to improve quality continually. Evaluation involves analysing and making judgements about what worked and what worked less well, and deciding how to do things differently next time.

While monitoring and evaluation take place throughout the first implementation of any new provision, a suitable time for a major evaluation is when the first cohort of students completes its programme.

Many colleges now have well-established annual curriculum review and evaluation cycles. Clearly, any evaluation will need to fit in with the requirements of these college systems. Most, however, have some common features which require programme teams to:

- revisit programme objectives, quality criteria and standards
- use statistical and qualitative data as evidence to review the provision in the light of these (e.g. retention, completion and achievement rates and student satisfaction surveys)
- identify strengths and areas for development
- decide how to do things differently next time

- draw up a proposed action plan
- report to appropriate body (e.g. faculty, Quality Council)

Such systems also require colleges at a higher level to:

- receive reports from programme teams
- develop an overview of the reports, including strengths and areas for development
- follow up any problems
- make judgements about faculty/college priorities and resource allocation
- ensure feedback to programme teams about these decisions (often referred to as closing the feedback loop, this step is crucially important, otherwise evaluation reports can seem to disappear)
- agree action plans, responsibilities and resources

It is important to stress that evaluation is both ongoing and periodic. Having a formal annual evaluation system should not mean that evaluation only takes place at that time.

Summary

Curriculum development and change are not easy: they make enormous demands on already busy staff. Colleges participating in this project developed the terms 'heroes' and 'champions' to describe such people. This terminology not only reflects the important nature of the developmental work they are undertaking, but also suggests something of the approach others should adopt to them: they should be valued, appreciated and defended from more demands. There are messages here for both team leaders and senior managers with responsibility for the curriculum at college level.

Messages for team leaders

about planning

- make action plans brief and achievable
- have short- and long-term objectives
- ensure schedules are realistic
- be aware of external uncontrollable factors
- attend to staff development

about people and communication

- communicate effectively
- develop a team approach including team meetings and liaison
- simplify terminology
- ensure responsibilities are clear
- use appropriate staff
- recognise previous success
- recognise staff strengths and abilities
- the skills required include empathy, listening, understanding

about resources

- more time is needed for planning
- identify adequate support/resource needs
- link with other colleges involved in similar developments

about operational matters

- promote supported, structured student learning
- make use of cross-institutional meetings, networks and expertise
- use internal and external verifiers for advice
- attend to accommodation and catering arrangements
- develop a student assessment record system

- foster and develop senior management backing
- involve students in curriculum development and seek their views
- minimise paper work

about evaluating

- monitor regularly
- review progress
- use performance indicators to help improve quality:

MESSAGES FOR COLLEGE CURRICULUM MANAGERS
about planning

- don't rush in
- plan well in advance
- set realistic but reasonably ambitious targets
- relate the development to other college priorities and policies
- develop and seek approval for a fully costed action plan

about leadership, people and communication

- provide vision
- lead and co-ordinate
- give time, take interest, talk to staff
- be a champion of the development
- persuade staff
- give teams and their managers support
- ensure teams have authority
- support team meetings
- react to challenges from teams
- choose the right people
- clarify roles and responsibilities
- develop a creative formality
- recognise achievement/hard work: these are the college heroes
- disseminate information

about resources

- ensure adequate resources
- allocate extra resources for development where possible
- seek external assistance
- avoid duplication of effort
- avoid paper mountains

about evaluating

- monitor, review and evaluate the effect on students
- use and develop monitoring, review and evaluation processes

The monitoring instrument

While most colleges now have curriculum review and evaluation (CRE) systems which feed into and inform college planning, many of these are based on annual cycles. These may be too long to ensure that quality is maintained during periods of rapid curriculum change.

After consulting colleagues in a number of colleges, it was apparent that there was a need for an instrument that could be used to check for quality, at any point in the planning cycle. A helpful analogy was drawn with a thermometer which can be used at any time to give a quick indication whether all is well. A thermometer does not tell you what is wrong, although it indicates the probable seriousness of the situation, points to various possibilities and

excludes others; neither does it tell you what you should do to return to full health. More sophisticated problem solving is required for that. Thus the instrument should be seen as an additional tool to help staff manage the curriculum in ways which help ensure its quality.

This instrument could similarly be applied to the last cohort of students on the 'old' programme, as well as to the first students on the new. Staff in both situations will be under additional pressures: in the former they will be planing the new while completing the old; in the latter they will be delivering a new programme for the first time. Quality during this time may well be under threat and the instrument can monitor this.

The necessary characteristics of such an instrument were thought to be that it should:

- be quick and easy to administer — it should not over-burden already busy staff
- be capable of being customised to fit with a college's existing quality practices and culture

After some deliberation, an instrument with three parts was drawn up to meet these criteria. Its parts were:

- management information system (MIS) data collection and report on attendance, punctuality and retention. This data would be given to course teams from the central MIS on a regular basis, say monthly
- student and staff perception report based on responses to the question 'What three things could most improve the learning experience for you?'
- a red alert mechanism for use when quality is suffering and usual channels for improvement appear to have failed

Given these broad guidelines, project colleges were asked to customise the instrument to make it compatible with their existing quality systems and cultures.

THE MONITORING INSTRUMENT IN USE

MIS DATA REPORT

This part of the instrument consisted of data to be given to the course team by the college MIS. Its purpose was to give course teams suitable data so they could identify trends and patterns at a glance. Attendance, retention and punctuality were the aspects chosen. It was felt that significant variations, changes or trends in these three would indicate changes in quality.

Most of the participating colleges' MIS could not yet deliver such information regularly to course teams, although several reported being close to being able to do so. Some colleges therefore set up dedicated databases to provide the information and others paper-based systems. While the dedicated databases were useful for project purposes, their more general use would not be recommended because they took too much time to set up.

Many teams were sceptical, not just about the ability of MIS to deliver such data, but also its usefulness to the team. Several said, for example, that even if it did work, it would only give them back information they had earlier fed in.

As it was used, attitudes began to change: people became convinced that it could deliver data regularly. In one college, for example, the project team's attitudes toward the centralised provision of such course-based data changed dramatically from negative to positive. This appears to have been because:

- participants had evidence that the college systems could provide accurate and regular data
- MIS staff had clearly communicated the range of information that could be provided
- the staff realised the management uses to which such information could be put.

Despite the limitations of system and attitude, most colleges managed to provide their course teams with the required data in some form. This was helpful in identifying trends early and sometimes possible problems relating to aspects of the programme, individual staff members, individual learners or groups of learners. In one college, the data showed significantly lower attendance rates for numeracy than for other aspects of the newly introduced GNVQ programme. Other data enabled staff to identify early any erratic or problematic attendance.

STUDENT AND STAFF PERCEPTION REPORT: WHAT THREE THINGS?

This part of the instrument involved asking students 'What three things could we do to most improve the learning experience for you?' Staff were asked slightly different questions. The purpose was to provide the most current and easily analysed data on student (and staff) perceptions quickly; it also supplemented information from annual CRE systems. It was thought that learners (and staff) would know what needed improving and that this might prove a relatively quick and easy way of getting this information. All the participating colleges reported favourably on this part of the instrument.

Many colleges added to it by asking people what three things were going well. This was a good example of colleges customising the instrument to fit their own quality cultures: in this case to celebrate success as well as to strive for continual improvement. Most colleges found that this aspect of the instrument was relatively quick and easy to administer, collate and analyse. They also discovered that clear messages emerged, many of which would not have been discovered so clearly or so quickly without this question being asked.

For example, one college had a resit GCSE programme with deteriorating student attendance and poor retention rates. In response to being asked what three things would most improve their learning experience, many students replied that they wanted more personal support from tutors and more of a feeling of being on a coherent learning programme (interestingly this corresponds with key findings of BTEC's research on retention — *Staying the Course*, BTEC, 1993)

This same college became so impressed by the responses to this question that it introduced its use across the college. Another college had concerns about numeracy, aroused originally by the MIS data, confirmed by responses to this question.

Sometimes, to course teams' surprise, non-curricular aspects of the programme were identified as needing improvement. For example, the lunch break was not staggered so the queue at the refectory was very long. People also wanted multiple, or reference only, copies of popular books in the library.

It was surprising how clear the messages were from a number of individual responses. Many colleges took care to ensure that individuals did not confer and confidentiality was assured. Typically two or three key messages would emerge clearly from the set of responses, with up to one third of students identifying the same message in one way or another.

THE RED ALERT MECHANISM

This part of the instrument consisted of a form with accompanying guidelines for use. It was designed as a failsafe, to be used when quality was suffering and the usual channels for improvement had been tried and failed. Even in colleges committed to quality and quality improvement, things can go wrong. On these occasions, if usual methods to put things right fail, a short cut is needed. This form indicates quality is in danger and that something needs to be done quickly to avert it.

Its essential features were suggested, but colleges were free to customise it. It needed to:

- name the recipient of the form
- have a space for the sender's name
- invite the sender to identify the problem
- (importantly) require the sender to describe what had already been done to improve matters
- invite the sender to suggest a possible solution(s)
- indicate how quickly the recipient was required to respond (e.g. in two working days)

An example of a red alert form is in the Appendix (pp15 and 16).

The guidelines for using the red alert form were seen as crucial. They outlined the usual way of dealing with difficulties (as close to the source as possible) and stressed that red alerts should only be sent very occasionally when the usual methods had been tried and had failed.

Colleges were least enthusiastic about this part of the instrument. Some thought it gave the wrong message about quality, focusing as it did on difficulties; others feared it would be misused and managers would be inundated by mischievous red alerts. Yet others felt its successful use required a culture of continuous improvement which was, as yet, insufficiently developed in their colleges. As a consequence of these reservations, in some colleges only staff were told about the red alerts; in others, however, students too had access to them and their potential use was explained to them as part of the college's overall commitment to quality. In these colleges the accompanying guidance was also carefully developed and explained.

There was, in the event, no example of false red alerts being sent. Of the ones that were sent, many seemed to focus on seemingly intractable problems to do with equipment or accommodation. For example, in one college a banging door in a training restaurant disturbed staff, students and customers. All previous attempts to get it fixed had failed, but a red alert sent to the designated recipient (in this case an associate principal) resulted in it being mended, to everyone's satisfaction, in 24 hours.

In another college, a course had one hour a week timetabled in a computer suite. One week the printer was not working. The member of staff reported it in the usual way. The second week it was still not working: he complained. The third week he sent a red alert and the problem was solved.

While most staff apparently chose not to tackle difficult people problems through the red alert, on occasion this did happen. For example, in one college a red alert was sent about a student whose attendance continued to be problematic and who was significantly behind on course work. As a consequence, a meeting was set up with the student, the tutor, the head of department and the assistant principal to seek a solution to renegotiate progression through the course.

Some colleges suggested 'quality red alert' or 'quality course alert' might be better titles for this part of the instrument.

THE INSTRUMENT EVALUATED

Having designed and trialled the instrument, it needed to be evaluated with participating colleges. In general terms it was judged to have met its design criteria (quick and easy to use and capable of being customised to fit colleges' existing quality systems). It was also felt to have justified its development and use in that it did enable patterns and messages to be identified significantly more clearly and earlier than they would otherwise have been. Taking each in turn:

MIS DATA REPORT

While most colleges were unable at present to deliver this information to course teams as envisaged, many were convinced of its potential. As MIS become more effective, such data should be easily provided, although some participants felt that punctuality should be omitted. It is important that the information is presented to course teams in a way they can understand. They may also need help in using the data to improve quality.

STUDENT AND STAFF PERCEPTION REPORT: WHAT THREE THINGS?

This was the most powerful aspect of the instrument. It quickly and easily provided new information for staff. It also identified trends and patterns much earlier than would otherwise have been the case. A crucial aspect in its effectiveness was timing: too frequent use can blunt its power. On reflection, most people felt it should be used fairly soon after the start of a new programme, but not immediately. Three weeks into the new programme seemed a reasonable time, with subsequent use every term. However, colleges will need to make judgements on the basis of their own circumstances. In addition to its regular use, it also has potential as a means of beginning to address difficulties as and when they occur (see GCSE resit programme example, page 10).

Another issue that emerged was one of feedback. If students (or staff) are asked their views on what should be improved, they need to be given feedback in response. Sometimes the team members themselves can take action; at other times they may need to refer a decision elsewhere. On some occasions, action may be desirable but not a priority; on others, the college may make a decision not to act. What-ever the result, students deserve to know having taken the trouble to provide the responses as requested.

THE RED ALERT MECHANISM

The reservations about this aspect of the instrument were widespread but not by any means total. Such a system has potential but needs to be part of a widely shared culture of continual improvement. It needs careful introduction, with the guidelines for use perhaps being developed further. The issue of who the recipient should be needs to be decided locally. For students it may be the course leader or their line manager. Sometimes, however, it may need to be someone more senior in the college with the authority to intervene and make decisions.

The time required for a response must also be decided. It is important to stress that this is for a response, not necessarily a decision or an action. If one accepts that red alerts are only sent in difficult circumstances, the response must be quick; however, the response time must also be achievable. Two working days seemed to be reasonable. Another issue which requires further clarification is possible links between the red alert, complaints procedures and college charters. For example, the *Charter for Further Education* (DFE, 1993) states:

> 'Whether you are a student, employer or a member of the local community, if you are not satisfied with the teaching or any other service provided you have the right to take action as follows:
>
> - first, speak or write to the college or other organisation responsible for delivering the service. Explain the problem. You have the right to expect a courteous and efficient initial response to your concerns within 10 working days
> - if you are not satisfied with the final outcome, there are further, more formal steps you can take. These are explained [below].
>
> **Complaints about colleges**
> You have the right to expect colleges to have arrangements in place for handling formal complaints, and to:
>
> - make sure that these arrangements are clear and effective
> - publish details in their charters
> - consider formal complaints fairly and quickly
> - give an initial response to a complaint within 10 working days
> - give their reasons if they reject your complaint.'

Since the summer of 1994 colleges have been required to publish their own charters, which must include details of their complaints procedures. Whether these requirements will obviate the need for something like the red alert is not yet clear. It may be for instance that the red alert could be a part of the college's complaints procedure. On the other hand, it might be that the complaints procedure is adopted for students and a red alert is developed for staff use.

In summary, the monitoring instrument was evaluated positively in the main. One unintended but not altogether surprising outcome, however, was that having been provided with this information, course teams then had to decide what to do with it and how to manage the situations identified.

It became apparent that staff sometimes felt unequal to these tasks. Sometimes the team could decide to take action, but on other occasions the course manager was a main grade lecturer who felt it was not appropriate to deal with the messages being communicated.

Sometimes the issues identified were to do with college-wide resourcing priorities; sometimes to do with college curriculum or quality policies; and very occasionally, particular staff or students were involved. Often issues to do with curriculum, quality and line management appeared confused. At the same time, once the issues were identified by the instrument, the need to manage them became an imperative.

No simple solutions were found to these complex problems. The experience did, however, lead some colleges to clarify curriculum, quality, resource and line management responsibilities. Others discussed the possibility of developing job descriptions for the team leader, or course manager, a title some preferred. Where this had been done, it did appear to give the team leader greater authority to deal with identified issues, something that was sometimes felt to be lacking by others.

Conclusions

When the curriculum is rapidly changing and developing, quality is particularly vulnerable. However, there are things that can help. For example:

- be clear about the change and the reasons for it
- plan changes in advance
- develop costed action plans
- ensure developments are consistent with curriculum and quality policies
- negotiate and agree areas of responsibility with members of the planning team, the implementation team and college curriculum and quality managers
- monitor for quality on a regular basis, using the monitoring instrument
- use the data to identify potential difficulties
- manage the situations before they become problems
- encourage all staff to take responsibility for maintaining and enhancing quality

Unresolved issues

For many of the course teams involved in this project, the data gathered in the course of using the instrument resulted in the identification of clear patterns, trends or messages. As a consequence, action was often required in order to maintain or enhance quality. There was sometimes a lack of clarity about whose responsibility this was and where the power of decision making lay. In particular, some course team leaders felt they lacked either the authority or the skills to deal with the issues identified. In some cases, this was partially resolved by the development of a job description for the course manager and/or the clarification of the roles of quality, curriculum and line managers.

However, this may be only a small illustration of a wider and growing issue for colleges. There is now an explicit national imperative to improve participation, drive down unit costs and enhance the quality of college provision. The introduction of national performance indicators (see *Measuring Achievement*, FEFC 94/31) and the publication of examination results are but two manifestations of this.

Colleges are also increasingly developing internal quality assurance procedures. These involve gathering statistical and qualitative information which is then used for internal quality management purposes. For example, colleges use the data to help them make decisions and intervene in situations to improve quality. To do this effectively often entails making hard decisions and almost always requires complex technical and interpersonal skills. Colleges may welcome further development work and guidance in this more general area of using data to manage for quality.

Related publications

Staying the Course, BTEC, 1993
Measuring Achievement, Circular 94/31, FEFC, 1994
Continuous Improvement and Quality Standards, FEU, 1994
Management Information Systems and the Curriculum, FEU, 1993
Value Added in Further Education, FEU, 1993
Current Developments in Value Added, FEDA, 1995
Making Quality Your Own, FEU, 1995

Further information
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In each college a senior manager and programme team members from two curriculum areas were involved in the project work. Each team reflected on past curriculum development practices and systematically recorded its developing practice as it planned and introduced curriculum change. These records were used to build up the checklists for action listed under the various stages of curriculum development. About half the teams were concerned with the introduction of GNVQs; others with NVQs, the international baccalaureate and greater flexible learning. The teams also trialled the monitoring instrument, by administering it at various stages in the process.

FEDA project team: Kevin Donovan, Christopher Parkin, Stella Dixon

Appendix

Red alert!

Guidelines for the use of a red alert form

1 A system only to be used when urgent action is needed.

2 The matter must be giving cause for concern.

3 The matter must have given rise to repeated complaints.

4 Only when the normal processes of solving a problem — student/teacher/tutor/head of section — have failed, may this form be used.

5 Forms will be held by heads of section; the number of these is limited, only one person holding the master. It is not possible to copy from the red form.

6 The red alert form is to be directed to the head of faculty, who must respond in two working days. Appropriate action to follow as soon as possible.

Red alert!

FROM:	DATE SENT:	DATE REPLIED:

TO:	CC: Head of Section Head of Faculty

Nature of difficulty:

Action already taken:

Possible solutions:

Signed:

NB Response to be given within two working days of receipt of this form.

Action taken:

Signed: